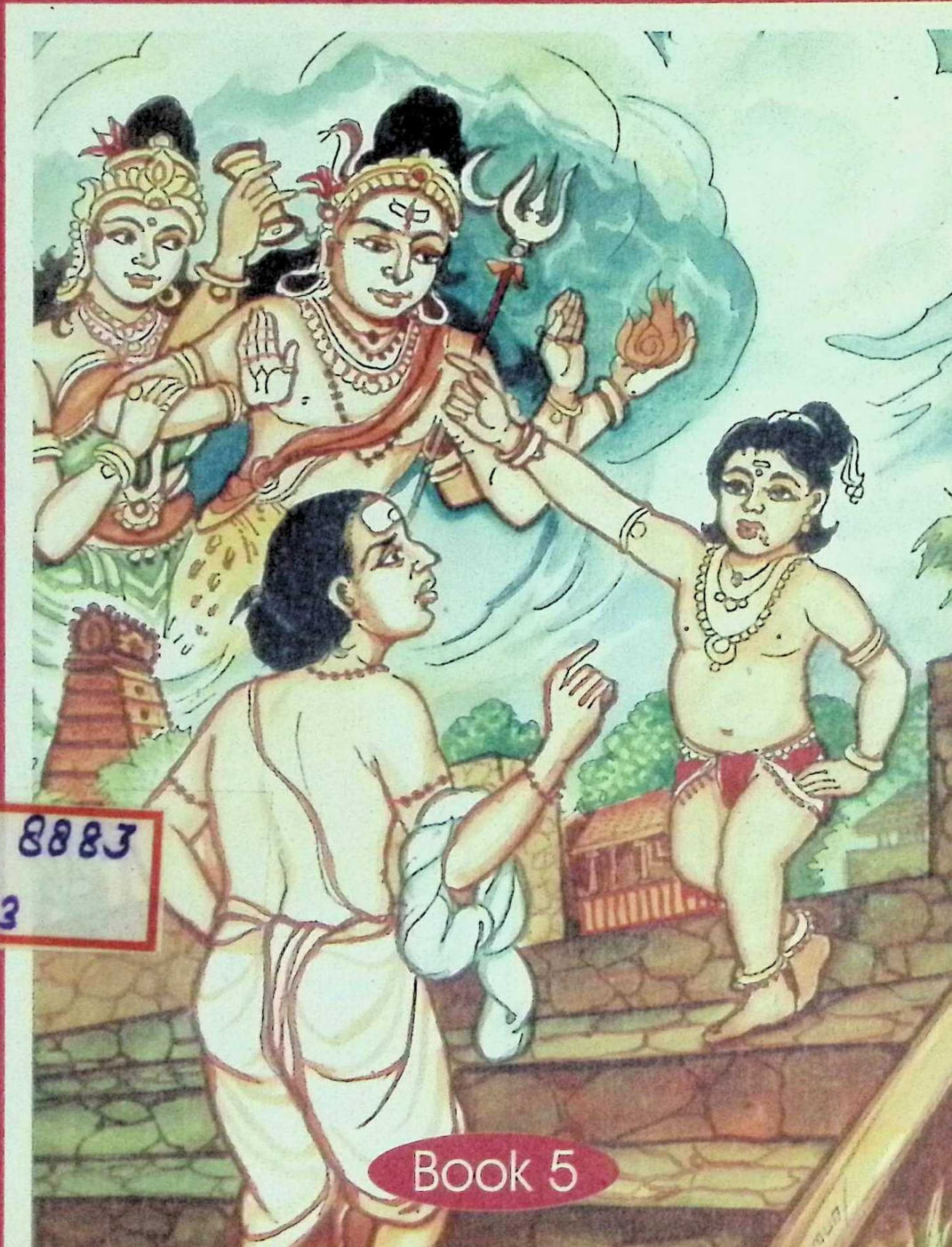


STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA



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Book 5

STORIES OF **63 SAINTS** OF SOUTH INDIA

The Stories of this Book

TIRUGNANA SAMBANDAR

SAKKIYA NAYANAR

SIRAPPULI NAYANAR

SIRUTHONAD NAYANAR

GANANATHA NAYANAR



Book 5

TIRUGNANA SAMBANDAR

Sambandar is acclaimed as a child prodigy. Sekkizhar has sung his glory in 1256 quatrains, 5024 lines. That alone cannot contain the Divinity of Sambandar and his services in sixteen years. Yes, he accomplished his mission in sixteen brief years, when some other spiritual giants have taken a lot more years. He himself had sung several hundreds of Thevarams, but only 384 are left. He was born in Pugali or Sirkazhi also known as Brahmapuram or Kazhumalam, a place where all sins were believed to be wiped off, all wastes were washed off. He was born to devoted couple Sivapada-Irudayar and Bhagavatiyar. Sivapada irudayar means the man, who has lodged the lotus feet of the Lord Siva in his heart. He was a Vedic Brahmin. Sambandar was a loving and lovable child, who was treated as a treasure of God by his parents and the rest of the family. He loved to hear the Vedas and smiled readily at the mention of the God's name even as an infant. He was doted as a child and all that love sowed divinity in the child's mind. One day, as a child of three years, he went with his father to the Thoniappar temple (Thoniappar means the saviour, who would see ashore the struggling souls from the sea of sufferings). Sambandar's father seated him on the steps of the temple tank called the Brahmatirtam and went for a dip. As the father was busy with his ceremonial dip, the child prompted by its solitude and probably of its previous birth's associations, called out toward the temple "Ammaye!" Appa!(mother, father) with trembling lips, eyes filled with tears. Blessed as the child was, the cosmic Father and Mother immediately rushed to its call. The Father requested the Mother Uma to give the child the milk of Divine knowledge. As desired



by Siva, Uma milked with love in to a golden cup and fed the child and embraced it with love, while the Lord wiped his tears; words of wisdom, unknown to a normal child of three years, rolled out in good rhythm and tune from the toddler's mouth. When Sivapada irudayar stepped out of the water and saw his child, with milk trickling from his mouth, he was quite anxious as to the nature of the milk. He questioned the child as to who offered the milk, concerned that it should not infect the child. The blessed child looked at the temple with twinkling eyes and answered in excellent rhyme and metre, that it was the god of Brahmapuram with a crescent moon on His head, and ashes all over His body, the cosmic Father with His consort who came on the Bull and it was the Divine Mother who fed him the milk. Sang the child " He who provides the Absolute Joy, has also stolen my heart".

Even as his father was stupefied, savants gathered around them. Priests led him into the temple with all honours due to the God. At the sanctum sanctorum of Sattanathar, the God of Sirkazhi, he sang a few more quatrains to the pleasure of the public gathered around. The learned scholars praised the child as a prodigy and gift of God. His name and fame spread far and wide. All the Siva devotees cheered at the advent of the precious child as the messenger of God. After visiting some neighbouring temples, the father dutifully carried Sambandar to Tiru-Kolakkam near Sirkazhi, where he sang Thevarams, beating time with his hands. A pair of gold cymbals inscribed with the mantra NA-MA-SI-VA-YA came in to his hands by Divine grace. Tirunilakanta Yalpannar played the Yazh (a stringed instrument) as an accompaniment and his wife seconded him with her sweet voice. They formed a chorus of melodious, musical creations filled with devotion, offering great spiritual enjoyment to the public. Sambandar and his

troupe crossed the Kolladam river and entered Chidambaram. At Chidambaram he was given a grand welcome and he treated the 3000 priests of the temple as Sivganas, the followers of Lord Siva. He sang a few more Thevarams on Nataraja at Chidambaram and then went to Tiruvetkalam and to Puliur, the birth place of Nilakanta Yalpanar. After admiring the beauty of the reigning Lord at Pennadakkam, he walked on foot to Tiru-Aratturai. God appeared in the dream of his devotees and dignitaries and informed them of Sambandar's arrival and directed them to bring



the boy in His own palanquin with due temple honours. The God also appeared in Sambandar's dream and asked him to accept all the honours and avail the palanquin service. Thus Sambandar travelled from temple to temple in state regalia. At Cheignalur, Sambandar got down from his pearl palanquin and walked humbly, for it was the birth place of the great devotee Chandesa Nayanar. Though the world treated him with great love and respect, as a boy of eight, he still was humble. The truly great always would readily appreciate others' love and devotion. After visiting Tiru Panandal and other places Sambandar returned with his father to Sirkazhi.

As was customary with the Brahmins, the Upanayanam (wearing of the sacred thread to begin Brahmacharyam) was conducted for him and he was taught to chant the Gayathri Mantra. They desired that he must study the Vedas. But to their surprise the intuitive genius of eight chanted all the four Vedas with the proper intonations and explained their intrinsic meanings. His hymns in Tamil were really the essence of the Vedas and Agamas. He also explained the significance of the Panchakshara, the five lettered Siva-mantra NA-MA-SI-VA-YA.

Next important episode in the life of Sambandar was when he met Appar or Thirunavukkarasar. The youngster called his senior Appar and he responded as "Adiyen". Both together popularised Saivism. The second round of Sambandar's visits to temples too deployed the regal paraphernalia. The father also joined the tour. He desired to conduct a grand Yagam and needed funds for the same. They went to the shrines north of the Cauveri - Velur, Pungur, Vanniyur, Pandanai Nallur, Velvikkudi, Tirupazhanam and came to Tiruvaiyaru, where awaited him a grand reception; he rendered many verses there on the presiding deity. Then he proceeded to Tirpachil Achiramam, as he was visiting all the temples enroute. The chief of the place was Kollimazhavan, whose daughter suffered from acute epilepsy. Kollimazhavan brought his daughter to the temple to meet Sambandar and with great faith informed him how the disease had been incurable. Sambandar invoked the limitless powers of the Lord and prayed that she be cured. What a miracle! The woman was cured completely at the end of the song and she got up and walked over to Sambandar to fall at his feet. The father and daughter went around the temple with him, thanked him profusely and became the staunch devotees of Siva, and followers of Sambandar.

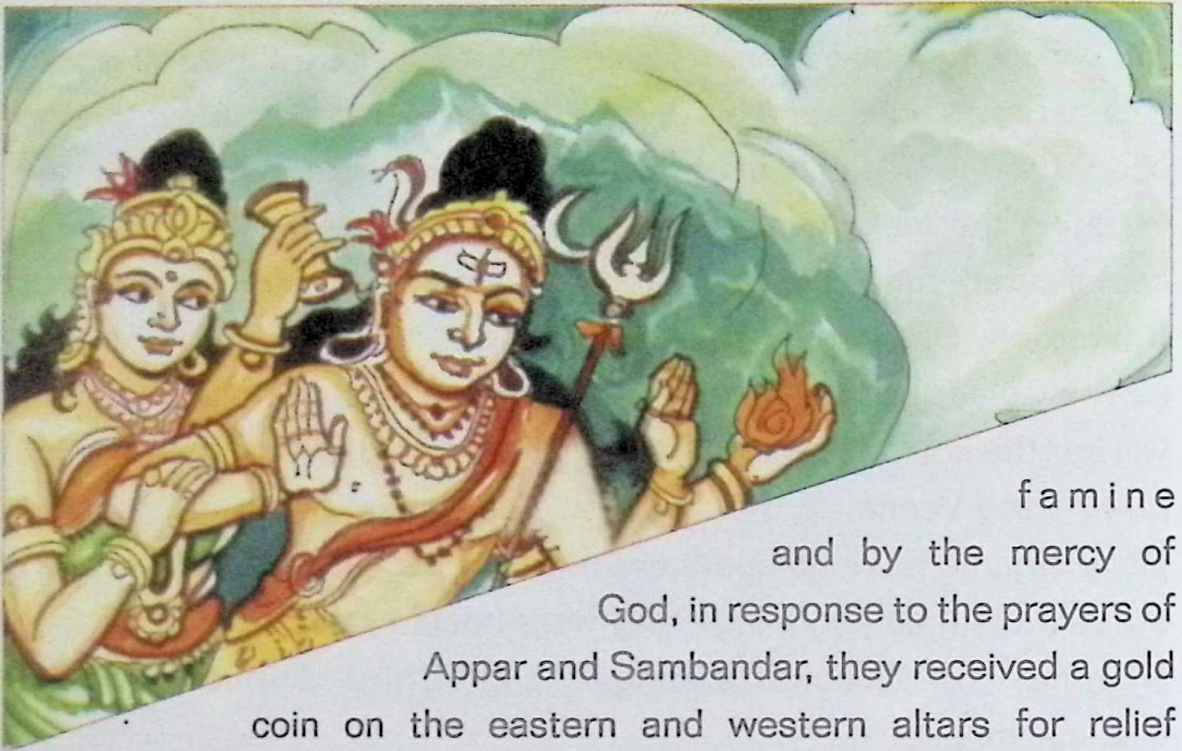


Along his tour of Kongunadu, he passed Chenkundrur during the winter; the people were suffering from a severe infectious fever and he told them that Mahadeva was the medicine and sang in praise and prayed for their well being; the fever subsided and the people thanked him and laid their faith on the Universal Father, Siva. Seasons changed and the scorching summer seemed to afflict the devotees. A pearl canopy descended from the sky by the mercy of Siva and the saint with his followers took pleasure walking in its shade singing His glory and serving the people on the way. After visiting many places like Navalur, Naraiyur, Sivapuram, Kudamookku (Kumbakonam), Nageswaram and Tiru Idaimarudur, the party reached Tiru Avadu Turai. There Sivapada Irudayar told his son Sambandar to send him back and if possible with the sum required for the great Yagam he wanted to perform. Sambandar sang a hymn surrendering and seeking help. And mystically a Divine spirit descended and placed a pouch of 1000 gold coins on the altar. He offered the same to his father, wishing him to perform the sacrifice and also give other Brahmins for their Yagams. Then the party came to Dharmapuram where Pannar's mother was born. While Pannar played on his Veena, his wife sang all the Thevarams. The relatives of Pannar paid their respects to the boy



prodigy, but felt that it was the Veena of Pannar that won popularity to the songs. Though Pannar refused to agree and attributed all glory to Sambandar's songs and his divinity, he requested his master to sing a song that the Veena cannot follow and Sambandar obliged. He tried imitating the melody and when he could not follow the intricate and complicated tune, he was even ready to break the instrument in frustration. Sambandar stopped him and said that strings of the Veena can only play upon the heart, whereas the songs that sing of the Divine will stir the soul. He wished that Nilakanta Yalpannar should continue playing the Veena, to the best of his ability and do not fall a prey to petty arguments or competitions and that the God would take care of the rest. On their pilgrimage they were hosted well by Tiru Nila Nakka Nayanar at Tiruchattamangai and Chiru Thondar at Tiru Changattangudi.

At Tirumarukal a young merchant, accompanied by a virgin, was staying in a temple mutt. A snake had bitten him and he was dying. The girl, who had accompanied him, wailed in anguish. Sambandar went there and inquired the cause of her grief. She explained to him that they were seven daughters to her father Daman, a merchant of Vaippar and that the man dying in front of her eyes was her lover, with whom she had eloped. Considering her position and faith, he sang a song of prayer and the man was restored to life instantly with no trace of poison. Sambandar went then to Tirupugalur and stayed with Muruganar in his Mutt. Saint Appar came there too from Tiru Arur and was welcomed by him happily. He also visited Arur and returned. Chiru Thondar and Nila Nakkar too joined them. All of them went to Tiru Kadavur, stayed in the hospitality of Kungiliakalaya Nayanar for a few days and proceeded to Tiru-Vizhi-Mizhalai. At Mizhalai there was a great

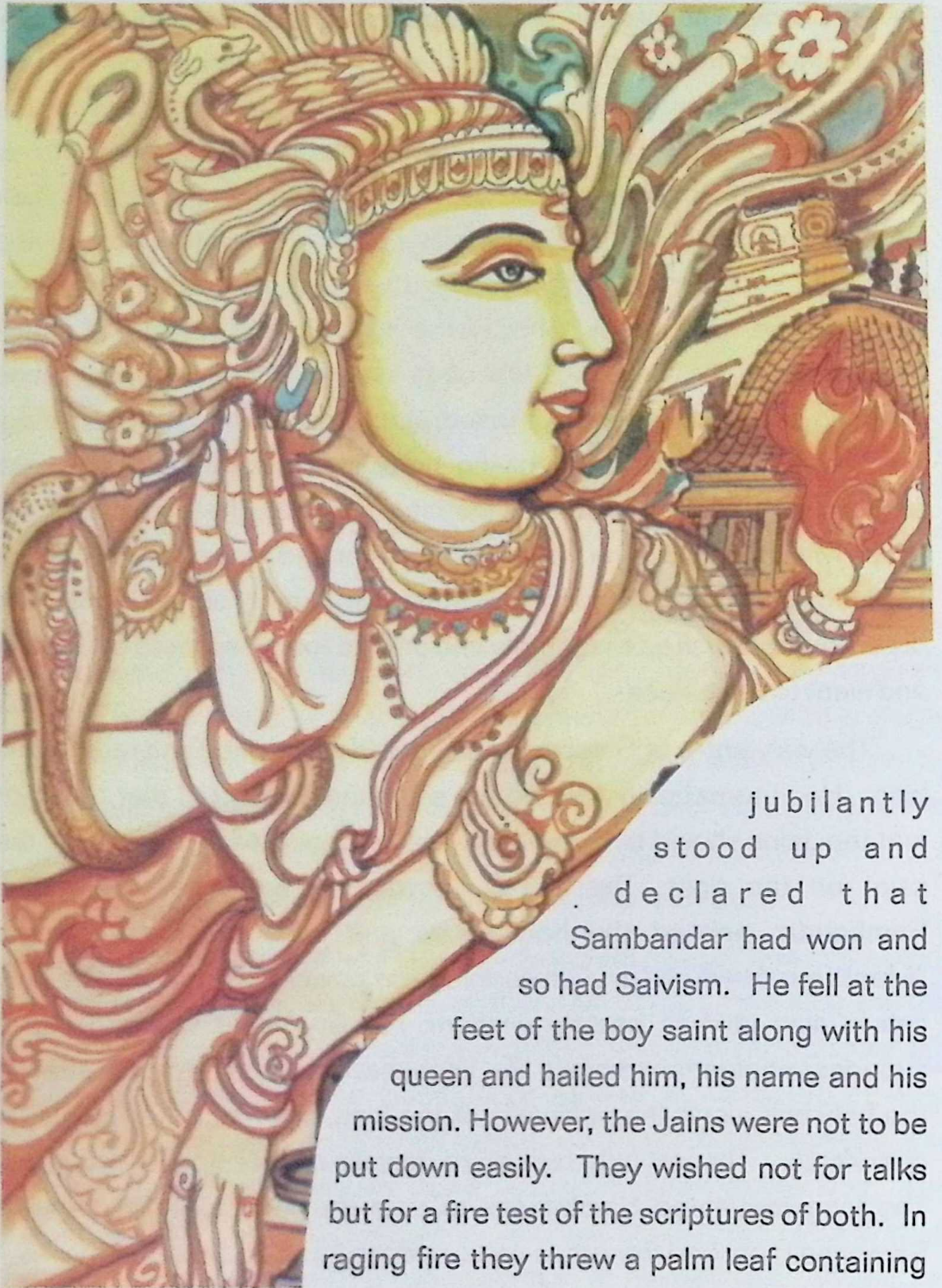


famine and by the mercy of God, in response to the prayers of Appar and Sambandar, they received a gold coin on the eastern and western altars for relief operations. As things improved, they proceeded to Vedaranyam. Here Appar sang ten songs to open the Vedic doors that remained closed for hundreds of years and Sambandar closed it with a single song, indicating that the knowledge of the Vedas was laid open by Appar and summarised by Sambandar. The queen of Madurai sent her loyal messengers and the palanquin inviting Gnana Sambandar to put down the Jains and their cunning practices for conversion.

Kun Pandian, then king of the Pandyas, had already become a Jain. Only the queen Mangayarkarasi, descendant of the Chola king and the prime minister, Kulachirai were staunch Siva devotees and had sent the secret invitation. When Sambandar arrived at Madurai, he was received well by the Saivites and lodged in a mutt near the temple. His very presence perturbed the Jains, who complained to the king. The Jains sought the king's permission, who had almost become a puppet in their hands, to set afire the residence of Sambandar. When the

power of their incantation did not ignite, as they claimed, the Jains physically set fire to the mutt. Sambandar's followers put off the fire, while he redirected its power to take possession of the king. In the meanwhile the king was looking troubled. He had a discussion with his queen about the boy saint. The queen just concluded saying that their support will be only for the spiritually better, more divine person and that they should rather wait to see the outcome of the discussion between the two groups. Shortly the effect of his own crude action boomeranged on the king; his body was burning with pain, head spinning and his heart almost failed; the king was incurably suffering. The Jains tried their best, giving medicines chanting mantras and fanning with peacock feather. Nothing worked. The queen and the Prime Minister Kulachirai visited Sambandar and requested him to cure the king and build confidence. Sambandar humbly obliged. He, with his entourage, visited the temple and prayed for the success of Saivism and went to the palace.

The very entry of Sambandar triggered some hope and relief in the king. He automatically saluted the saint and suggested that the saint and the Jains should first cure him - the Jains seated on his left and the saint on the right. The Jains' efforts only made the fever rise; Sambandar applied the holy ashes and sang the famous verse "Manṭiram Avadu Neeru" describing the powers of the ash. The holy ash is also said to bestow wisdom, humility, inner strength and a superior satisfaction to one's life. With that song and the application of the holy ash along the right side of the king, like magic he was cured completely. The left side hurt more despite all attempts by the jains. The king requested Sambandar to cure the left side also. When Sambandar applied the ashes and cured the left side also, the king



jubilantly
stood up and
declared that
Sambandar had won and
so had Saivism. He fell at the
feet of the boy saint along with his
queen and hailed him, his name and his
mission. However, the Jains were not to be
put down easily. They wished not for talks
but for a fire test of the scriptures of both. In
raging fire they threw a palm leaf containing

their doctrines and it was burnt to ashes. Sambandar wrote a specific hymn (Bhogamarta) and offered the palm leaf to the flames. Not only was it not burnt, it came out brighter. The king announced the victory of Saivism happily. The Jains suggested a water test and they all stepped on the shores of surging Vaigai river. The Jain scroll (containing the words Asti - Nasti) was thrown into the river and was swept away. Sambandar wrote a verse of benediction of Brahmins (Vazhga Andanar) and let it in the stream. The palm leaf that contained the verse swam like a fish and went upstream and surfaced at Tiru Edakam; as a final straw Sambandar performed the miracle of straightening the hunched back of the king by merely saying "Vendanum Onguka" meaning let the king also stand straight. The king and the country rejoiced. Sambandar was received with princely honours in the palace. The people hailed the victory of Saivism throughout the country.

When Sivapada Irudayar heard of the great news, he hurried to see his divine son. When the whole world hailed Sambandar, he just hailed the king of kings Siva. Sambandar desired to tour all over the Pandya kingdom and with great paraphernalia, along with the king, queen and premier Kulachirai, went to all the temples - Tirupparam Kundram, Tiruputhur, Kanapper, Kuttralam, Tirunelveli, Rameswaram and even to Sri Lanka by boat. There, their itinerary included Tirukedeswaram and Tirukkonamalai. Then he returned, after visiting Tiruvadānai, Tiruppunalvasal and Manamerkudi, to the land of Cauveri. The victory march of the pilgrims had to cross a river in spate. No helmsman would dare to cross the turbulent river. Sambandar seated his group in a boat and sang the praise of Siva and they were all seen safely ashore on the opposite side. At yet another place he met Sari Buddha in discussion



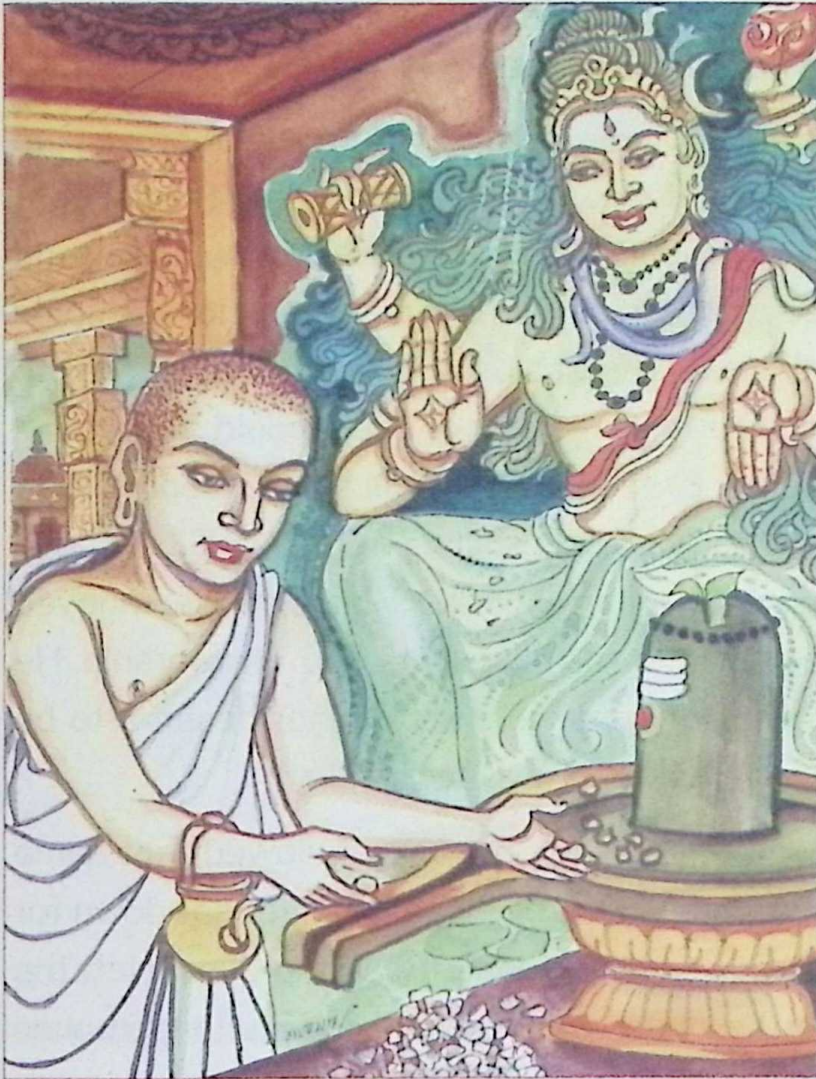
victoriously. Then he visited Tirupugalur where saint Appar was also staying. Without realising that Appar was one of the palanquin bearers when Sambandar inquired after Appar, he answered as a humble servant, carrying the palanquin of the prodigy. They greeted each other with great love and warmth and learnt of the happenings around the country in their tours, the miracles of God and the success of Saivism. Then he went to Sirkazhi and stayed a few days at home with his parents, to their joy. After that, he proceeded to Mylapore. He visited Thillai, Thiruvannamalai and Tiru-ottur, where he converted sterile palmyra trees into fruitful ones to offset the challenge of a heretic. Then he went to Kanchipuram and then to Tiru Alangadu, where Karaikal Ammaiyar witnessed Siva's cosmic dance. Sambandar, out of reverence for her, refrained from walking on foot on that soil. He sang a song revering the presiding deity and went to Kalahasti. Here he worshipped Siva and Kannappar standing by His side. He also mentally worshipped Siva at Kailash, Kedarnath and Gokaranam. Then he went to Tiruvottriyur and offered a few songs on Thyagaraja.

It was then he met Sivanesan from Mylapore. Sivanesan was a rich merchant of Mylapore and an ardent follower of Sambandar. At Sambandar's victory over the Jains and establishing Saivism in Pandya kingdom, he not only rejoiced but vowed to get his daughter, a very well brought up girl Pumpavai, married to Sambandar and declared that all that was his was Sambandar's. Pumpavai was an excellent girl with fine features and a divine nature. She had been brought up with devotion to Sambandar and she also dedicated herself to Sambandar in her mind as his wife. But, one day when she was about twelve years, a cobra bit her while she was gathering flowers and she died. Sivanesan, who had given his daughter in marriage to Sambandar at

heart, burnt her body and preserved the ashes in an urn. He placed it in the house where she had lived and covered it with her silk robes and ornaments. Sivanesan gave an excellent reception to Sambandar at Mylapore. At Kapaleeswarar temple Sambandar offered his devotional songs and asked for the urn containing the ashes of Sivanesan's daughter. As Sambandar sang songs, verse by verse, slowly the body was formed from the ashes and it came to life as beautiful as ever. Pumpavai bowed to him and Sivanesan proposed the marriage between the two. Sambandar, who knew Sivanesan's vow and Pumpavai's love, indicated to them that since he had given her life, he was to be considered as her father and that marriage could not take place. Though disappointed, Pumpavai devoted her life to service and love to Saivism and Sambandar and remained a virgin for the rest of her life.

Sixteen year old Sambandar left Mylapore and went to Chidambaram, where his father had a proposal for his marriage with his friend's daughter. Though Sambandar did not want to enter into a conjugal relationship, his refusal was considered as natural of a good groom. Nambiandar Nambi's daughter and Sambandar were to be married at Nallur. Everyone known to them, all their friends and family, saints and ascetics had gathered. After the wedlock was worn around her neck symbolically amidst Vedic recitations and with the blessings of Nila Nakkar, Paannar, Nambi, Murugar and Sivapaadar, Sambandar invoked Siva to redeem their souls and to be unified with Him. He sang his last song "Kadalaki"

SAKKIYA NAYANAR



Sakkiyar was a Buddhist by discipline and lived in a village called Tiru-Changa-mangai, near Kancheepuram. He studied a lot of scriptures in his tireless search for the ultimate truth that is God. In his thirst for knowledge, he also studied scriptures from other schools of thought and was struck by the Saivite principles. He believed that God

was the designer of our destiny. He believed that all actions and reactions originated from the God Himself by His divine will.

Following the Saivaite school of thought Sakkiya worshipped the Lingam form of Siva, though he still dressed like a Buddhist. Sakkiya loved the form of the Lingam, as that was the manifestation of Lord, where both the creator Brahma and the preserver Vishnu, in trying to

prove the supremacy, were contained. He was eccentric in his worshipping; instead of a flower he threw a stone at the Lingam, standing in the open under the vast sky. The compassionate Lord enjoyed this as a mother would the beating of her child. Perhaps Sakkiya wanted to hoodwink the Buddhists.

It is said that Vishnu and Brahma were quite egoistic to prove who was more powerful among them and to settle the scores they sought the help of Lord Siva, who decided to become a pillar growing beyond the sky and the universe and suggested to them that whoever could see His Beginning or End would be considered great. Brahma was to see His head and Vishnu the feet. Neither of them could succeed in their mission. But the creator Brahma was not willing to accept defeat. He encountered "Thazhampoo", a flower falling from Lord Siva's head midway and requested the flower to testify for Him. This lie annoyed Lord Siva and He banished that flower henceforth from His worship. He also admonished Lord Brahma that such a liar did not deserve to be worshipped and that there would be no temples for Him.

From the day he found the Lingam, Sakkiya followed that same ritual of pelting stones, sincerely. One of those days he sat down for dinner without pelting stones on his Lingam. Realising this he left the dinner midway, went to the open wilderness where his Lingam was standing. He picked up a stone and in obeisance stood with his eyes filled with tears. Lord Siva with His consort Uma appeared from the sky and blessed him, driving His devotee to ecstasy.

SIRAPPULI NAYANAR

On the banks of the Cauvery there is a village called Thiruvakkur where many Brahmins lived. It was famous for its charity to the

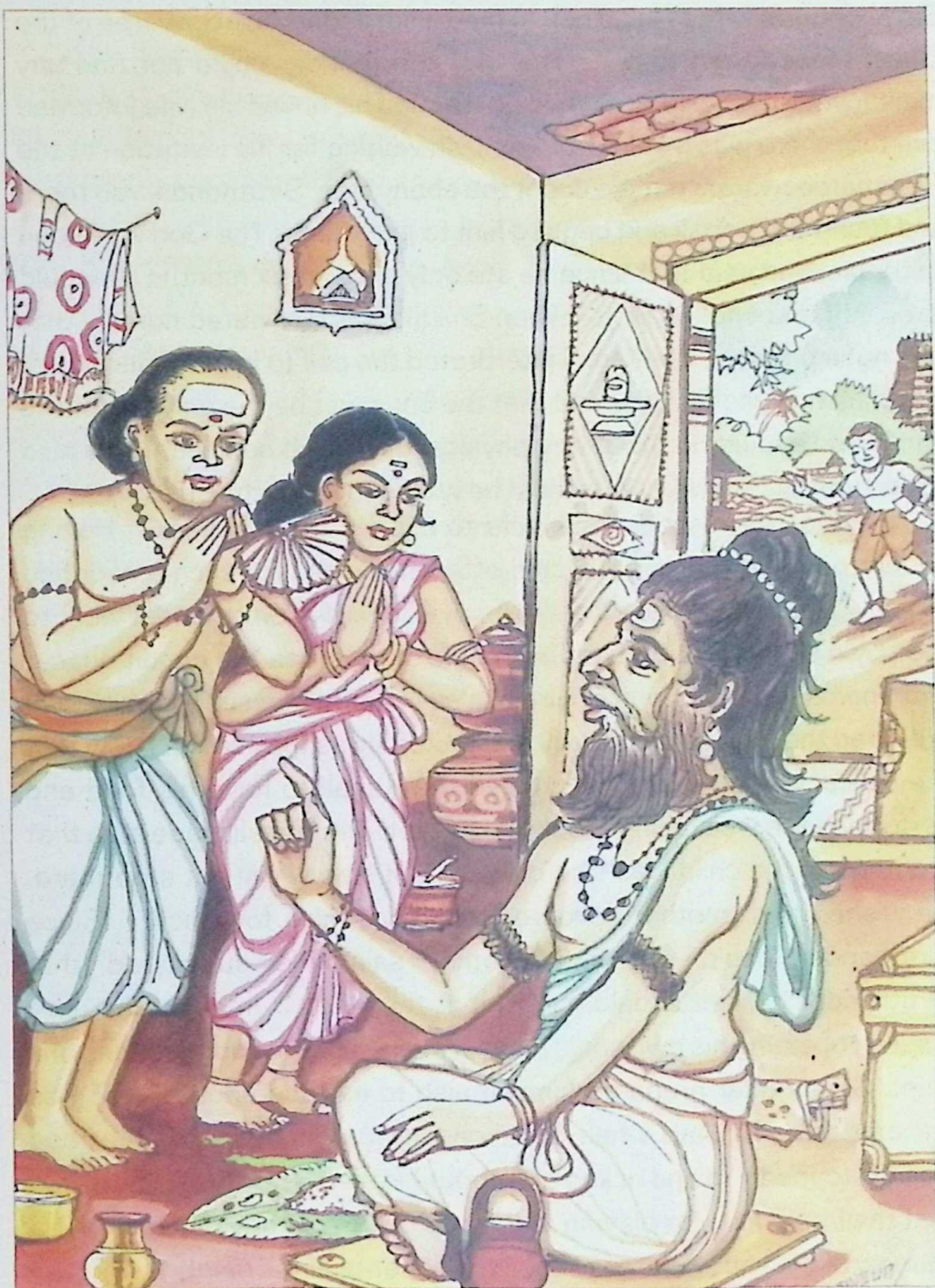


devotees of God. This hospitality of an entire village, its devotion and dedication have been well praised by Gnana Sambandar in his works. Sirappuli was a saint and Vedic scholar, who hailed from this village. He was a philanthropist, loved by all for his affectionate disposition and giving nature, a devotee serving other devotees. He dutifully maintained the holy pyre for his rituals of every day, engrossed in Siva Mantra and Siva Puja. He chanted the Lord's name ever in his heart and attained His feet.

SIRUTHONDA NAYANAR

In the regime of the Chola kings there was a wealthy town called Thiruchengattangudi, along the banks of the Cauvery. Ganapatiswaram was the temple of Lord Siva situated in the town. Paranjothi, meaning flame of the Lord, hailed from the family of physicians. He was also a skillful warrior, an excellent commander and a brave soldier. He had won many a war for the king as his general, had killed many an enemy for his king and country. Though he was the personal advisor to the king, his mind was constantly with Lord Siva; he never ate before feeding a sage or a mendicant. But when the king learnt that he was a great devotee of Lord Siva, he honoured him for his valiant services and relieved him of his duties with sufficient wealth to serve well the Lord and his devotees for generations. He ever humbly identified himself as a simple small servant of God and served the devotees of Siva. This gave him the name Siru Thondar. To aid him in his services, he married a dutiful and beautiful woman called Tiru Venkattu Nangai and begot a charming son and named him Siralan.

Siruthondar had served many a devotee, who visited the Ganapathiwaram temple, including Gnana Sambandar and his train of followers, till one day the God at Kailash decided to try him Himself. The God took the form of a terrible Kapala-Bhairava with all the respective decorations, which in this case indicated that he was in reality Lord Siva, holding on to a skull for a bowl, begging for food. He entered Tiruchengattangudi inquiring for the house of Siruthondar, who fed the saints, pretending to be very hungry and very thirsty. When the Kapali found the house, Siruthondar had gone out looking for a mendicant, for he never ate before feeding a holy man. He refused to enter the house without the male occupant being available and directed



Siruthondar's wife to send him to meet Him under the ebony tree of the Ganapateeswaram temple. That day Siruthondar could not find any mendicant to serve food. When he reached his house his wife informed him that there was a saint from Kailash waiting for his invitation at the Ganapateeswaram temple under the ebony tree. Siruthondar ran there and found the Kapali and begged him to join them. The God was keen to try him and said that since he ate only once in six months he would eat a calf and end his fast. When Siruthondar answered humbly that was not a problem, the Kapali interpreted the calf to be a tender boy of less than five years of age and that the boy must be the only son of the family and should not have any physical or mental handicap. He also added that the boy's parents must be willing to make the offer.

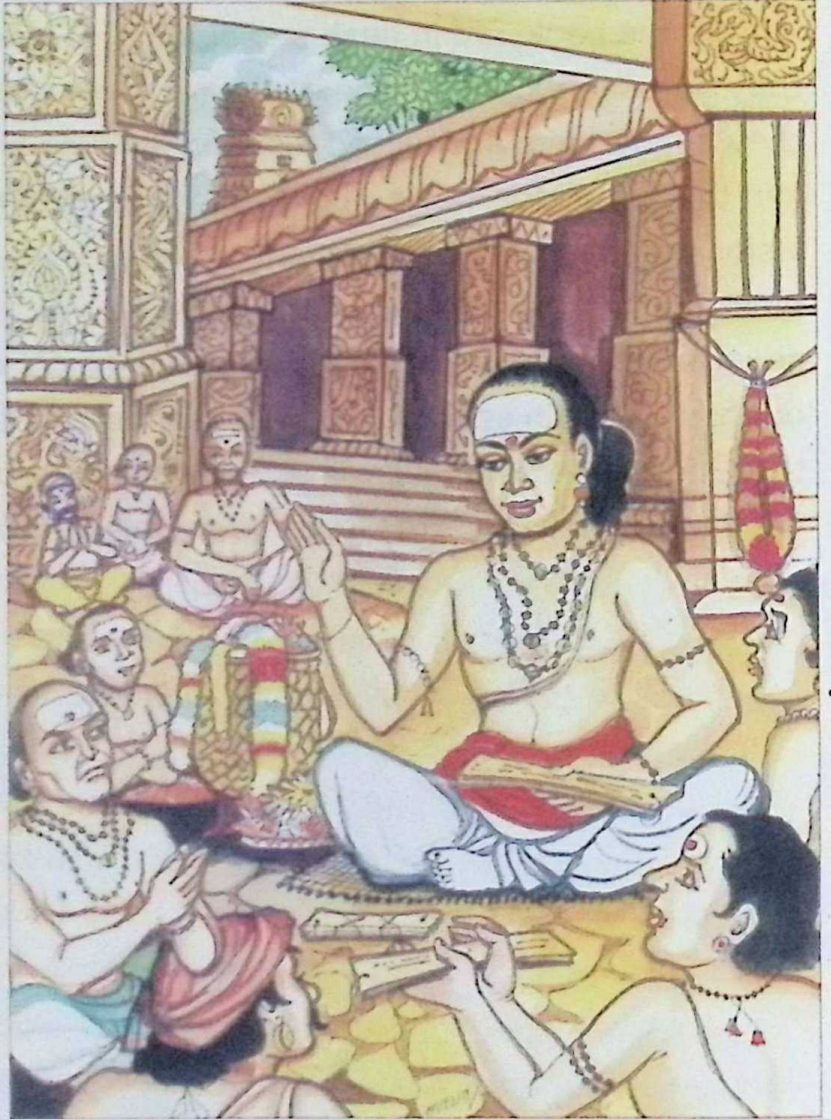
Siruthondar rushed to his wife to explain the conditions. Having understood that no parent would offer their child for such a sacrifice willingly, they decided to offer their only son Sirala; Siruthondar went to the boy's school and brought him home and as was the condition, cut him themselves for which Sirala also offered himself happily and prepared the food as deliciously and tastefully as they could. Now that the delicacy was ready, they invited the Kapali to have his food and performed the welcoming rituals at His feet. The Kapali made sure that the head of the child was also cooked. But Kapali will not stop there. He wished that another devotee of Siva join Him for lunch. Since Siruthondar could not find another saint. He suggested that Siruthondar himself should join Him at the meal. Imagine the gory tragedy of eating his own son's flesh! Not to slight the suggestions of a saint, Siruthondar prepared himself also to eat and another leaf was set and served. And when Siruthondar was about to eat the food Kapali stopped him and asked him about his son. They aptly answered that their son must be playing in the back yard, as they did not want a shadow of the sad situation to spoil the appetite of the saint.

But now Kapali wished that their son join them for lunch and insisted on waiting. Feeling helpless, obeying the suggestion, they surrendered to the Lord and summoned their son. Surprise! Yes, surprisingly they heard their son answering their call and saw him walk in from the backyard in flesh and blood. He was their own son, whom they had sacrificed, smiling at them. Overwhelmed by parental love they hugged him and kissed him and ushered him to the dining hall to join the Kapali for meals. Lo! Kapali was not there. Then they saw a vision of Kapali with his heavenly consort Uma and their son Muruga blessing them all three. Siruthondar as a warrior must have severed several heads in battle field, as was his duty. Was this a test to see how dutiful he was in serving his devotees, detached and dedicated? Only the God knows what His will is. Only He is responsible for all life and death and when this is realised, we are released from all burden.



GANANATHA NAYANAR

Gananathar hailed from the same town as Gnana Sambandar, the fertile Sirkazhi. He was a Vedic scholar, an authority in the rituals and practices and the Agamas. He was a family man, who trained scholars in the service of God. Besides erudition, he was an expert in weaving garlands, maintaining the temple gardens for flowers. He soon became a fast friend of Saint Gnana



Sambandar whose friendship won him the Divine grace. Gananatha Nayanar won a permanent place as a Sivagana, purely by discharging his duties and leading his life dedicated to God.



STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA

The Periyapuram, delineating the lives of the 63 famous Saivite saints of Tamil Nadu, known popularly as the "Arupathumoonru Nayanmar," was written by Sekkizhar, a wise chief minister of the Chola kingdom. Since then these stories have been narrated by countless generations of scholars in the temples of Tamil Nadu, and retold in both Tamil and English.

The devotion of these saints to Lord Siva was all encompassing. They were prepared to sacrifice not only their material wealth but even their lives and those of their families in the service of the Lord and His devotees. The numerous verses composed by the 63 saints in praise of Lord Siva in the various temples of Tamil Nadu have stood the test of time. The life histories of these saints serve as a role model to young people, and speak of the importance of devotion to duty and commitment to society.

The present stories have been retold in simple English for the benefit of young readers in India and abroad by Kalpana Ramani, Asha Kannan and Bhama Chandran, and edited by Lakshmi Venkatraman. Every story is brought to life in the evocative illustrations of Subha. This book is the first in a series of eight volumes envisaged by the Koviloor Adinam Children's Book Trust.

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